***FOCUSING AND THE 'EGO' - A PERSONAL JOURNEY :***

***FROM SPIRITUAL ABUSE TO RADICAL ACCEPTANCE***

One summer morning in 2018 I was a participant in Peter Gill's Introduction to Focusing Skills workshop -we were a small group of people in a safe, comfortable therapy room a mile away from my home. Peter had some soft toys which were really appealing and he used these to show different aspects of what he was feeling; “Something here feels quite shy and small!" he said with a little animal nestling into his shoulder, “And something else over here isn't sure about that one and is a bit critical."

Suddenly I had a realisation, "Oh my God this is like the Voice Dialogue process that I loved all those years ago in the 80's; he's talking about bringing a kind awareness to different aspects of his inner world and how they feel in his body in an energetic way. This is familiar and this is what I love - to be in touch with all the different and often opposite parts of me and my psyche and how they manifest in my body/mind - this is so wonderful and speaks to me with such resonance!” I felt for the first time the possibility of accepting all the parts inside me... and with that a sense of coming home......

So here is an account of how my journey led to that moment and how Focusing subsequently changed my whole attitude to my inner life and healing process. From feeling that there is something fundamentally 'wrong' with my ego/personality patterns, having received negative input and criticism for both of these in two spiritual teachings. I can now sense, having practised Focusing for over three years, a much more accepting attitude and a real understanding of how and why these aspects of me were formed. Without these 'ego', adaptive or survival energies/patterns, I could not have survived and I am aware now that they need me to listen and relate to them with empathy and appreciation. It's like a 365 degree turn in my approach to the 'ego'.

I have a confession to make! There have been several occasions over the last few years when *a part of me* has had a strong desire to want to shoot the spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle! This might be a strange thing to write in an essay about Focusing but it feels relevant to my personal journey! And he's not the only spiritual teacher that parts of me have felt angry and murderous about - and still feel to a certain extent - when I remember the wounding that I felt from the inferred criticism of the so called 'ego' made by some of the teachers and 'so called' teachers that I came across..

I need to make it clear that because of this abuse from a few of these 'teachers' who I had personal contact with and from one in particular with whom I was involved for over 13 years, there is a 'charge' in me about *how* certain spiritual teachers have talked about the so called 'Ego' - and about the potential trauma that this can bring about. I am not saying that Tolle is 'wrong' in what he says – he has his own perspective about the spiritual journey from his own experience and I really acknowledge that many people have found his books very helpful in assisting them to realising that their thoughts and feelings are not the whole of them and that not identifying with them and being Present or in the 'Now' helps with this.

At the same time his words can so *easily be interpreted* to mean that there is something 'wrong' with the Ego and that in some way it – as well as the 'pain body' - need to be dissolved through being in the 'Now'. It now seems clear to me that this is *not trauma informed* and does not describe how, in order to adapt to the environment we were in as very small ones, we had to take on 'survival' energies and conditioned parts. As Laurence Heller says in his book, 'Healing Developmental Trauma': “Traumatized individuals, which includes most of us to differing degrees, need both top-down and bottom-up approaches that address nervous system imbalances as well as issues of identity. (I would say Focusing address both these) “Many people recognize the 'power of now' as Tolle calls it, but because of their nervous system dysregulation they are unable to remain in the present moment. Falling short of this ideal becomes another reason for individuals with trauma to feel bad about themselves.” [1]

Here is a quote from Eckhart Tolle: “The ego thinks something has been taken away from you because somebody else has received something good. It’s a complete illusion, but that’s the madness of the ego.” [2] This of course has truth in it but it's just that the 'ego' and its protective ways are not shown any real empathy or compassion and so it's not surprising that those parts of us feel criticized when we read such spiritual quotes.

I recently came across a talk between Eckhart Tolle and Oprah Winfrey “How to Overcome the Ego.” [3] Even the title gives the impression that this is something negative to 'overcome' rather than how I now see it - that this ego comprises aspects/personality energies/selves that need to be embraced, accepted, respected and loved rather than transcended and overcome. I notice that one of the comments under this talk on YouTube is this: “I long to reach that part of myself... to be still and be conscious and not thinking”.. This is very typical of many people on the spiritual path who believe in transcendence and have not come to a more embodied, somatic/trauma, neurological and relational approach to personal development or spirituality. This is now often called 'Spiritual Bypassing'.

Over a period of 25 years from the age of 28 I was involved with two very different spiritual teachings. This involved a kind of second 'conditioning' following on from that of my family. As someone who was desperately seeking answers to the unhappiness that came from not having been 'met' or deeply seen as a child, and having modelled myself on my father as a way of surviving in the world, I definitely had some blind spots and a lack of discernment with regard to which 'teachers' would be helpful in my healing. Although my father was a good man who really loved me, he had a patriarchal character and position in society so I was attracted to those type of teachers – the charismatic ones. You could say it was a search for the perfect mixture of 'Daddy' and God.

My first teacher - for 12 years - was Osho (formerly known as Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh) the Indian guru who was famous or should I say infamous for his teachings because amongst many things they involved exploring sexual freedom and owning lots of Rolls Royces (!) as a counterbalance to many Indians who reject any kind of materialism. I lived near the Ashram in Pune, India for 9 months and lived and worked in the commune known as Rajneeshpuram in Oregon for almost a year.

I appreciate that Osho was trying to get us to dis-identify from the ego through meditation and I really valued his more dynamic and body-oriented meditations as a way of becoming aware of something that is not those personality energies. Reading his books for the first time brought about a huge shift in my consciousness for which I will always be grateful and many of the experiences I had around his teaching were liberating and positive - but the 'ego' often seemed to be talked about in such a negative way – often as this 'false self'. Here is a quote From 'The Dhammapada, the Way of the Buddha' 2, Discourse #8: “Certainly, you will be feeling confused, because I am telling you just the opposite: I am telling you to get rid of the ego, because if you get rid of the ego, you get rid of the rock that is preventing the flow of your consciousness.” [4] This then is something to 'get rid of' which from my point of view – easily made me feel bad if I felt that these parts of me were very strong or if they didn't seem to be going away*.*

Osho was a teacher/Master of many traditions. In many ways he was very inclusive and brought together a synthesis of Western therapy and movement with Eastern philosophy and teachings which included Buddhism, Taoism, Sufism and Tantra. There is no doubt that he had a big impact on the western approach to spirituality and growth. Here is a quote from one of his talks “Die Oh Yogi, Die” “The ego simply does not exist in the present. If you come to the present, then the ego disappears. That is death to the ego. Coming to the present is the death of the ego.” [5] Yes it makes sense from one point of view but what about trauma, what about how trauma prevents you from being 'in the present?'

What I have learnt from Focusing is that being here and present, being the 'bigger you' means you can *be with* those so-called 'egoic parts' or protectors and defenders, as we call them in Inner Relationship Focusing, and through acceptance and deep listening they can start to relax. For example I might hear something in me saying :”This essay just isn't good enough – my mentor won't like it” and I can turn towards the felt-sense of that how that part of me feels and try to hear what it is afraid of or concerned about underneath the criticism. Maybe it doesn't want to fail because people won't love or approve of me - which could go back to how I felt as a child. Perhaps these early patterns will never go away; they are very deeply entrenched in some of us and at the same time they have helped us survive and need our deep appreciation and love. I find this quote that refers to an approach that is used in Focusing particularly resonating and reassuring: “When a part of me is able to feel loved, it awakens to it's own healing.” [6]

In some ways my Focusing journey and being aware of different energies/parts in my self and my psyche had actually begun a long time before I had ever heard the word Focusing. I was still a disciple or 'sannyasin' of Osho Rajneesh and living in a shared house in Hampstead. Someone had heard about a couple of therapists, Hal and Sidra Stone - authors of the ground breaking book, “Embracing Our Selves” - who were coming to London from California to share their 'consciousness tool' - Voice Dialogue. Several of us were intrigued and we ended up inviting them to give a workshop in our house. For me it was a huge opening and revealing experience - we were shown how to be in a pair, one being a 'facilitator' and to begin to talk about how we were feeling and then if some particular theme or strong energy started to emerge, we were encouraged to find another physical place to speak from this 'self'. The facilitator then spoke to this energy or 'part' of us - as if it was a separate 'personality'; it was completely transformational to find that each 'energy' felt so different and affected how the body felt and acted too. A revelation indeed to discover how to embody different aspects of ourselves. I was amazed! We trained intensively in this process for several days and I subsequently learned how to facilitate a session. With my partner at the time, we discovered we could relate to each other's 'inner child' or 'playful child' more easily and this enhanced our relationship.

Hal Stone himself (who had some sessions early in his psychotherapeutic life with Carl Jung in person) moved from a seeking-enlightenment approach, being fairly identified with his spiritual side – to embracing both ‘heaven and earth' as he puts it, where we need as human beings to embrace all of our opposites and our human-ness. I find these words of his resonate a lot with my own experience and feel that he explains how I now see the Ego very clearly:-

“If someone has an enlightenment experience, using the term as it is used in the East, does it mean that the individual has embraced all the selves? I don’t believe this to be the case. Instead, I believe it means that such people have devoted themselves to spiritual work and practice and have had a direct experience of God and/or cosmic reality/ cosmic consciousness. It is clear that many aspects of the great mystery become known to them and major changes in consciousness will occur within them.But do they know how to live in relationship? Do they know how to raise step-children? Do they know how to earn money and invest it? Do they know how to deal with acting-out children? Do they know what their disowned selves are? Do they know what happens in the unconscious when you convince people that they must be more loving and compassionate? Do they understand the reality of the “dragon energy” that is a part of them?

It is very doubtful that this is the case. It is our fate to live both sides in the psycho-spiritual path. *Our "ego states" are simply the many selves within us that we have identified with in the course of our growing up process.* To refer to them as "negative ego" is really quite sad. They are the selves that were conditioned into us in the maturation process and they have been doing their best to keep us safe and protected and successful on the planet. Now *spiritually identified people come along and they say that the mind or arrogance or selfishness or self-involvement are false selves or parts of the negative ego. For us nothing in the psyche is, in itself, negative or positive***.** The mind is a very handy thing to have available *so long as you are not identified with it.* Arrogance can give you power. Selfishness can give you boundaries. Self-involvement gives you entitlement. The trick is to learn how to not be identified with them or married to them.” [7]

It was a shame in some ways that I didn't continue with the Voice Dialogue explorations of my inner world but when another 'teacher' appeared in Totnes and, still naively thinking that others had 'the answer' to life and suffering, I unfortunately forgot all about 'parts work' and got caught up in another teaching in the search for that elusive 'enlightenment' .

As I write this, I can sense 'something in me' feeling a regret that I took that path but I also see that it was what felt right at the time and led me to eventually trust myself more and realise that I don't need to give my power away - that the answers are here inside and not in some spiritual teaching. Yes sometimes, in hindsight, the paths we take can feel circuitous and long drawn out!

My second spiritual 'teacher' was someone I met in Totnes who had experienced several 'awakenings' and attracted a small group of devoted 'followers', particularly those of us who's guru (Osho) had recently died. He was young, charismatic and seemingly very deep and 'awake' as well as much more approachable than a guru on a stage surrounded by hundreds of followers! He became an important part of my life for 13 years during which time I received a lot of personal criticism in the guise of 'spiritual advice' from him. Unfortunately because I was still naiive, affected by earlier trauma and therefore not able to discern a good teacher from a false one – I took on the criticism as the truth. I clearly remember him telling me at one point towards the end of our time together, “ You are one of the most disturbed people I have ever met”. Such an unkind, critical and damaging comment coming from someone I had looked up to, held in deep regard and respect for many years. He also told me in a critical way that my choosing to live and work in the Soviet Union and then becoming a follower of Osho Rajneesh was all my 'ego'. So unkind and not true. I can now see that the 'something in me' that needed answers – we could call it a Protector in Focusing terms – was involved in being drawn to find answers in this way. Sadly the way it was spoken and communicated was damaging, unhelpful and totally lacking in compassion and understanding. This stayed with me for years and was definitely a major contributing factor in my becoming seriously and chronically depressed and suicidal (including two attempts on my life) when I finally left this 'teacher'.

This negative kind of attitude towards the 'Ego' had a very painful effect on me when in a state of depression for many years following my difficult time with this 'false spiritual' teacher. I would read Tolle's books and then a critical part of me would feel there was something really 'wrong' with me for not being able to stay in the 'now' or to dissolve the pain-body by doing this. It was a constant sense of torment which has taken around 8 years of therapy and inner work/Focusing to completely dis-identify with, the last phase ending only 3 months ago.

Eventually after so many years of trying to find help for depression with several therapists trying to 'fix' me - a mindfulness coach finally helped me to see that there was nothing 'wrong' with feeling these dark energies and thoughts and they weren't the whole of me. What a lifting of a burden! This was a real awakening and a 'lightbulb' moment after so many despairing years. So the healing began and a few years later in 2018, a friend said to me one day - "You're always talking about all the stuff you feel in your body - you really should try Focusing - it's very helpful for that kind of thing".

It sounded interesting.... I was about to go on holiday to La Gomera - the unspoilt Canary Island and while there saw an advert outside a yoga studio near the beach for Yin Yoga and 'Somatic Experience'. It sounded intriguing so I booked a session with a wonderfully sensitive German woman and it was amazing! A wonderful combination of feeling the warmth and aliveness in my body as well as touching into all the grief and difficulties and painful parts of me too - and held in such a compassionate way. I felt deeply affected and determined to find out more on my return. On googling this - I discovered someone near Bristol who did Somatic Experience and Focusing and that they were closely connected. This was Peter Gill of Living Focusing [8] and he was running introductory workshops very near to my home. I signed up!

So you can imagine, after having suffered serious depression in the 10 years following my time with this so called 'teacher' who I had believed in for about 14 years, it was a huge relief and a sense of enormous acceptance and understanding to discover Focusing in 2018 when I first attended that first Focusing skills workshop with Peter Gill.

For me, the time of 'ego-bashing' on the spiritual path is over. We need empathy, understanding and deep listening for these 'survival' parts in us and the practice of Focusing is all about these qualities and approaches. I remember clearly my first Focusing Retreat in 2018 led by Gordon Adam at Bala Brook on Dartmoor; I had picked up Ann Weiser Cornell's Book, 'The Radical Acceptance of Everything'. The title itself felt inspirational to me and as I read a chapter near the beginning I saw this quote “We (as Focusers) are holders of the open space that includes whatever wants to come. *We are not afraid of what comes in the focuser.* *We know that there are no enemies in the inner world*” And this includes thoughts (oh the yes to this!): “What if each things that comes is somehow a part of the process, and can be welcomed as such?” [9] I felt huge tears of relief and reassurance The part of me that had said there was something wrong with me for so long was now quietened and I felt a tangible and a very welcome sense of self-compassion.

Over the four years since the start of my Focusing journey, and having a much clearer sense of trauma through reading and through regular Focusing sessions and therapy, I now also understand that it was my naivete and gullibility – a result of early developmental trauma together with the cultural and religious conditioning of my childhood – that brought me to believe in a 'teacher' who was clearly in denial of his own pain and wanting to used his brief 'awakening' experiences to manipulate and control others in an attempt to avoid that.

The fact is that many people will do *anything* to avoid experiencing and exploring the deep pain and trauma that was experienced in childhood. This was true with this second 'teacher who I happen to know had a difficult time when young; Perhaps there are more usual ways of avoiding this pain such as addictions, remaining stuck, hurting others, high achieving there are spiritual types who claim to have had 'awakenings' of some sort, who use this experience as a way of having control and power over people who are in a vulnerable state through their own trauma. This is what I would call spiritual abuse.

Thankfully in the last 10-15 years, due to a substantial growth in therapies and healing modalities that are much more about the somatic and bodily aspects of ourselves as well as our psyches, including Focusing (which for me has a major role to play in this development) there are many these days who have seen through the fallacy - that our only goal should be to be conscious and in a still place that is free from thought.

From my deep immersion into Focusing and into the sense of accepting and 'being with' the felt sense and all the different energies within us – I have learned that what our conditioned parts need is to be heard, to be understood, to be loved – just in the same way that we should have been deeply seen and understood as a small child growing up. As a 'self-in-presence', we can begin to be that bigger self that can be aware of and start to relate to – those parts of us that may have been in conflict with each other for a long time. And for me the 'bigger self' carries a spiritual sense to it – it fits with my experience of what could be called God or Great Spirit or Source Energy.

There are now thankfully a growing number of people in different spiritual traditions including Christianity and Buddhism, who are turning to a more embodied spirituality. During my practitioner training I was inspired by the book 'Bio-Spirituality' where Focusing is brought into a spiritual context : “Focusing offers a practical alternative to those spiritual practices which fail to resolve the destruction and pain of self- hatred. It opens a doorway into the body that is rich in an experience of mystery, gift, and surprise.” [10] This is such a radically different approach to the kind of spiritual teachings I experienced and one that needs no hierarchy or belief. I find that there is a natural connection for me now with the essence of Christianity that feels uncluttered by dogma or a more intellectual approach.

I feel so fortunate and grateful that I found Focusing where those parts of me that had been criticized (both by myself and others) can at last begin to be accepted – and not only accepted but ***radically*** accepted. Obviously this is an on-going process and not an easy one – there are still many old survival patterns showing up in my body/mind which can be physically uncomfortable, in conflict and challenging to accept but overall there is a strong sense of being on 'the right track'. I feel a lot more self-compassion and a definite sense of 'moving forward' as Eugene Gendlin, the originator of Focusing said.

I am also very grateful to have had the opportunity to write this essay - to be able to reflect on my journey in this way, and to share my experience with others who may have had similar experiences. I'm thankful too to all those in the fields of psychology, trauma healing and neuroscience who have brought us to this new way of seeing ourselves.

It is a true gift to have finally discovered that **no part of me is 'bad'** and undeserving of acceptance and compassion. What a revelation after 70 years of feeling that something must be 'wrong' with me!

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